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ABSTRACT

This review of the literature on multicultural education is intended to help teachers to better meet the needs of students with learning disabilities from diverse cultural backgrounds. Introductory information defines multicultural education and explains the literature search procedure. A rationale for multicultural education is offered, followed by a discussion of the close relationship between culture and learning, the effects of prejudice and stereotyping, and the special needs of the multicultural student with learning disabilities. Exceptionality within cultural groups and the dangers of generalizing from one population to another are considered, as are the interrelationship of linguistic and disability factors among Limited English Proficiency (LEP) children and the current general failure to adequately serve these children. Ethnocentric attitudes in the schools are contrasted with attitudes endorsing cultural pluralism. The influence of proficiency in English on cognitive development of bilingual students is evaluated. Classroom needs of this population are identified and include providing bilingual special education services. (Contains 35 references.) (DB)

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Multicultural Education:
What Do We Need to Know to Better Meet Our Students' Needs ?

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Abstract

There is a growing need to learn a variety of ways to teach students with learning disabilities from diverse cultural backgrounds. Often cultural and ethno-linguistic differences are not distinguished from true learning problems, as a result, the number of children in special education is artificially increased (Wilkinson & Ortiz, 1986). An understanding of certain aspects and characteristics of multicultural education, from a variety of viewpoints, is important to be able to be better equipped to meet this need. The desired result is better learning for culturally diverse students, and acquisition of skills to aid both regular and special education teachers in creating a harmonious learning environment for all the students in the classroom. This paper presents information designed to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities from diverse cultural backgrounds, based on a review and analysis of reports written over a period of about 12 years on multicultural education. Multicultural education is but one way to strive toward enabling all learners to becoming participants in a global community.

Multicultural Education: What Do We Need to Know to Better Meet Our Students' Needs ?

Introduction

Multicultural education is said to take place when cultural pluralism becomes a reality in schools. Demographic studies indicate that the United States is becoming a richer mix of cultures, and that multicultural diversity is especially reflected among young children with special needs (Edmunds & Martinson, 1990). Multicultural education involves educating the student to adapt to a variety of cultural environments, by promoting understanding of cultures different from one's own and by fostering positive attitude towards cultural diversity. This can be done through incorporating bilingual education, cultural awareness of self and others, teacher education on the different aspects of various cultures, and by adapting the curriculum to the individual abilities and needs of each student. Multicultural education is now a specialized field of study, but it is not a new concept. It is merely a relatively new name for concepts that have existed since the 1920s, when educators began writing about and training others in intercultural education and ethnic studies (Gollnick & Chinn, 1990). One of the reasons progress in multicultural education has been slow is because many cultural groups tend to view themselves as the standard against which others should be judged (Banks, 1981). However, educators are beginning to understand that the cultural diversity of the society we live in requires multicultural

education. The main focus of multicultural education is to create a balance between valuing cultural diversity as a strength of a society, and understanding that it is the common cultural values which hold a society together. For many years, European and American societies have been able to adjust to the presence of culturally different groups or regions, however,their educational policy was formulated to reduce these differences by either ignoring them or by fighting them (Hutmacher, 1987). The purpose of this article is to present information designed to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities from diverse cultural backgrounds. The information is based on a review and analysis of reports written over a period of about 12 years on multicultural education for students with and without disabilities. Development of teaching strategies and planning the curricula, especially for a aminstreamed classroom, can be facilitated with the synthesis of relevant points from this study.

Literature Search Procedure

The literature search included a computer-assisted search on the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) (from 1980 to 1992) and Psychological Literature (PSYCH LIT) (from 1972 to 1992) databases. The descriptors used were "bilingual, cultural, multicultural, learning disabilities, exceptional children, and special education". Relevant reports were obtained, and bibliographies of the material obtained were reviewed for relevant books, articles, and papers. A hand search, under the subject index of bilingual education, bilingual students, and culture, as well as

the descriptors used in the computer searches, in *Exceptional Child Education Resources* from 1980 to 1992 was also conducted. Relevant data, observations, papers, and studies pertaining to the characteristics of multicultural education, especially for students with learning disabilities, in the United States, were included in this review.

Rationale

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94-142) has had a remarkable and significant impact on educational practices and programs including teacher preparation programs (Fuchigami, 1980). Through awareness and understanding of cultural diversity, educators can help students celebrate and appreciate the differences and unique aspects of various cultural groups (Mack, 1988). In the NCATE standards for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, which became effective January 1, 1979, multicultural education is explicitly addressed. The mandate required that preservice teachers should have knowledge of and experience with culturally and ethnically diverse students. Multicultural education is not solely intended for minority students or the geographic settings of the schools, on the contrary, it recognizes that each group exists as part of an interrelated whole, and it values cultural pluralism (Rodriguez, 1983). Advocates of multicultural education value the contributions of diverse cultural groups to the educational as well as the cultural aspects of society.

Culture and Learning

Culture provides the blueprint that determines the way an individual thinks, feels, and behaves in society (Gollnick & Chinn, 1991). Therefore, in a classroom full of students, each student has culture, parts of which are shared by all of the class members, and other aspects of the culture are shared only with family members or some members of the community. To understand the reactions, habits, or behaviors of a group of people, or even one person, one has to understand the context of the culture of which they are a part. Therefore, to be able to enhance the academic achievement of students with disabilities, the teacher should be familiar with relevant aspects of their culture, their disability, and the relationships among their cultural background, disability and learning styles. Inaccurate perceptions, stereotypes, and lack of familiarity with ethnic groups, their culture and history, and contemporary experiences can lead to low expectations and unwarranted generalizations about their educational potential (Ramirez, 1988).

Culture and learning are tightly intertwined. In learning new skills or information, individuals draw upon important cultural legacies: language and linguistic competence, cognition and cognitive style, value systems and beliefs, and self perceptions and esteem (Lynch & Lewis, 1988). It is important to separate cultural differences from deficiencies, however, services to exceptional children from minority cultures must not be denied by attributing the disability/disabilities to cultural differences.

Multicultural education views students' cultural backgrounds as positive and essential in developing classroom instruction and school environments (Gollnick & Chinn, 1991). Through the diverse cultural heritage the students bring with them, educators can enrich their curricula by incorporating activities that foster sensitivity to and awareness of cultural differences. Special educators have come to realize that they cannot meet the individual needs of culturally diverse, handicapped students without addressing the unique characteristics resulting from their ethnolinguistic backgrounds (Cegelka, 1988).

Prejudice and stereotyping contribute to most of the problems related to the various cultural groups (Banks, 1981). Prejudice may cause individuals or their behavior to be judged as deviant or disabled on the basis of characteristics that are typical for the dominant culture. Stereotyping may result in the assumption that a person will behave in certain ways, or have certain abilities, because of their identity as a member of a particular group. Individuals who only know, participate in, and see the world from their unique cultural and ethnic perspectives are denied important parts of the human experience and are culturally and ethnically encapsulated (Banks, 1981). An important objective of multicultural education is to help students develop cross-cultural competency, which consists of the skills, attitudes and knowledge needed to function within the individual's own culture, ethnic or otherwise, the universal national culture, as well as within and across different cultures. Within a macroculture, are smaller cultures, or

microcultures, that share some common characteristics of the macroculture but have some unique ones of their own. A microculture can be defined by gender, social class, religion, ability level, profession, educational qualification, geographic origin, etc. A person identified as exceptional in one cultural group may not be considered different in another. The terms ethnicity and exceptionality are distinct concepts, but are often confused by students and educators. One of the main objectives of multicultural special education is to ensure that ethnicity is not mistaken for exceptionality. Something that may be considered as deviant or unacceptable in one group may be normal and adaptive in another. For example, a society that placed a lot of value on musical talent may consider a tone deaf individual as learning disabled. The definition and identification of learning disabilities usually reflects the relative appropriateness, importance, and value of the deficient skills in the individual's present social and cultural context (Kolligan & Sternberg, 1987).

The needs of the multicultural student with learning disabilities are unique, in the sense that, it is often very difficult to separate out the effects of culture from the effects of the handicap itself. Even though a learning disability (LD) may occur concomitantly with environmental influences, like cultural differences, it is not the direct result of those conditions or influences. The exclusion clause of P.L. 94-142, and the NJCLD definition of LD (1981), makes it very clear that for an individual from a diverse cultural background to be considered learning

disabled, there must be evidence of a learning disorder, and evidence that this disorder is not due to cultural differences. One method to establish the relationship between culture and LD, is to compare culturally different students with peers from the same culture. This is one of the reasons that knowledge about different cultures is important.

The high number of students from multicultural backgrounds who perform poorly in schools is a concern for most educators. Migrant exceptional children are one of the most "at risk" populations in the U.S. schools today (Baca & Harris, 1988). There is little consensus as to the causes of this problem. One of the likely causes was thought to be a difference in the learning styles of the various groups. According to Dunn and Griggs (1990), although learning style differences do exist between and among multicultural subgroups in the United States, research suggests that there are apparently as many within-group differences as between group differences. A better understanding of the fundamental interrelationships of culture and learning can contribute to the development of a more pluralistic approach to education (Cegelka, 1988).

Culture and Exceptionality

In the United States, twenty-five million or more individuals from every ethnic and socioeconomic group fall into one or more of the categories of exceptionality (Gollnick & Chinn, 1991). Exceptional individuals include both handicapped and gifted individuals. Many exceptional individuals become a part of a

microculture because of their unique needs and abilities. Migrant exceptional students often feel the effects of poverty and multiple health problems (Baca & Harris, 1988). As a result, they are more likely to be affected by handicapping conditions. Their difficulties in school are usually caused by the combination of health problems, inadequate exposure to the English language, and lack of health care and follow-up due to frequent changes of residence. Migrant exceptional students have a variety of basic educational needs that must be addressed, including native language development and instruction, English as a second language instruction, self-concept enhancement, acculturation enhancement, and family and community involvement (Baca & Harris, 1988).

Diversity exists both among the various minority groups and within each of the groups (Baca, 1980). One should avoid the tendency to generalize from one diverse population to another. Even within a single minority group it is not possible to generalize, because of the regional, cultural, linguistic, cognitive, and other types of differences that might prevail.

Linguistic and Disability Factors

Ethnolinguistic minorities comprise about 20% of the population in the US, and by the year 2000 the level is expected to go up to 32% (Lynch & Lewis, 1988). Exceptional Limited English Proficiency (LEP) children are in double jeopardy - in addition to the difficulties posed by their handicapping condition, they face obstacles which arise from membership in a minority group and from their inadequate command of the English language (Gelb, 1982).

Without careful attention to the needs of language and culture in addition to needs generated by the disability, the educational enterprise will be doomed to failure (Gelb, 1982). Recognition of the impact of cultural and linguistic differences on learning problems is a relatively recent phenomenon in special education (Rueda, 1989). Both handicapped and LEP children belong to groups that are heterogeneous. The disabilities can range from mild to severe, and each individual child is more likely to have more in common with his/her non-handicapped peers than with each other. Although all LEP children have limited proficiency in English, the degree can vary widely. Even among speakers of the same language, one often notices a certain amount of diversity. For example, the German typically spoken in the north of Germany is quite different to that spoken in Munich, as is the English spoken in New York often quite different to that spoken in Arkansas.

Children with disabilities who are also LEP have generally not been adequately served in the schools (Bernal,1983). According to the U.S. Office of Special Education, an estimated 948,000 children may both be linguistically different and have disabilities (Baca & Cervantes, 1991). Based on the 1980 Census and the records of the Immigration and Naturalization Services, there are about 79 million school-aged children in the language minority group. The highest concentration seems to be in large urban areas. Many minority-culture students are, unfortunately, placed in special education classes due to cultural, linguistic and/or racial differences (Poplin & Wright, 1983). One of the causes for the unusually high,

and sometimes very low, representation of students from diverse cultural backgrounds in special education services, seems to be the difficulty resulting from language and cultural differences for school personnel working with students from a non-English language background (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1990). Researchers have found that there is a disproportionate representation of LEP Hispanic students in classes for students with LD (Ochoa, Pacheco, & Omark, 1983), and that significant numbers of LEP students may not need special education services (Mattes & Omark, 1984). Educators and researchers, in the area of LEP, emphasize that factors like race or language should not be ignored when determining the skill needs of these students, nor should they be denied access to special education because of these factors. Often linguistic differences are not distinguished from true learning problems. Children acquiring a second language often exhibit many of the characteristics which are similar to behaviors considered symptomatic of speech and language disorders or of learning disabilities (Ortiz & Wilkinson, 1987). For some students, lack of English proficiency may give rise to behaviors such as, poor comprehension, limited vocabulary, or grammatical and syntactical errors, which could be mistaken for communication disorders. Teachers who may not understand how English is acquired as a second language, often mistakenly refer LEP children for special education services. The percentage of minority group children represented in special education in proportion to those represented in the general population, far exceeds the expected incidence figures (Wilkinson

& Ortiz, 1986). State and federal policy mandate the reevaluation of special education placement of children on a regular basis, to minimize the problem of speech and language errors made during normal second language acquisition being confused with those associated with communication disorders. In the 1980s, there was a tendency to place LEP children in Bilingual Education classrooms without providing appropriate special education services for those with handicaps among them (Nuttall, Landurand, & Goldman, 1983). The probability also exists that many students in need of bilingual education are misclassified in special education, when no bilingual programs are available to serve them. Districts with the highest disproportionate levels of culturally diverse students in special education, have the smallest proportion of students in bilingual programs (Dew, 1980). Schools play a major role in identifying children with handicapping conditions. Some disabilities are identified in infancy and early childhood, but lack of school achievement helps pinpoint the most frequently occurring difficulties. It is the school personnel and the parents who decide who is being served, and under which category.

Ethnocentricism in schools results in members of one group trying to get members of another group to acculturate to their values. Since ethnocentric attitudes are often unconscious, those who hold them believe that they are genuinely acting in the best interests of the children they are trying to change (Gelb, 1982). Acculturation can be very painful for the students because it asks them to change and give up so much of what their culture has taught

them. Pluralism, on the other hand, uses the student's culture to build upon for learning and the enhancement of self concept. The individual is not expected to forgo his/her cultural heritage to exist and develop in the American society. Cultural pluralism rejects the deficit model, which holds that children from minority backgrounds come to school with cultural and linguistic defects that must be remedied (Poplin & Wright, 1983). Instead, it helps students to recognize that their language and customs are valuable, along with many others, and together they form a larger global culture. That does not mean that English should not be a part of the curriculum, but that it should be added to and not replace the child's native language. It is rare to find a person who does not enjoy the distinct cultures when dining in ethnic restaurants or attending folk art performances and festivals. People pay thousands for jewelry, handicrafts and art work native to other cultural groups. However, they tend not to appreciate such differences when they result in challenges in the classroom or the community, such as having to communicate with a child or parent who is not a native English speaker (Poplin & Wright, 1983).

Importance of Proficiency in English

Language is the framework in which the world view of a culture is molded, and it is language which outlines the boundaries and perspectives of a cultural system (Putsch, 1985). A language barrier prevents an individual from comprehending not only oral and written words, but also emotions and reactions.There is a great lack of information related to educational programming for

exceptional students in the language-minority group. Special education literature rarely discusses unique considerations in working with limited-English proficient or bilingual students (Ortiz, 1984). The effects of bilingualism, given a relatively high degree of proficiency, are not detrimental to mildly handicapped children, on the other hand, the same cognitive advantages which are evident in proficient bilinguals will also be observed in bilinguals who are mentally handicapped (Rueda, 1984). However, there is no definite evidence that bilingual and monolingual children can be distinguished on the basis of their cognitive processes, when cognitive development deviates from the normal pattern.

Classroom Needs

The United States has a wealth of immigrants from all over the world, so, for education today to be relevant, it should be multicultural. Schools must be concerned with the needs of a multicultural society and reflect its diversity throughout its organizational structure, since education is considered to be the process and product of an individual's interaction with the environment and society. One strategy for "multiculturizing" curriculum and instruction is to teach from a multicultural perspective (Gollnick & Chinn, 1991). Teachers need to ensure that cultural diversity and exceptionality are reflected in the curriculum in such a way, that they inculcate positive values and attitudes towards the preservation of ethnic and cultural diversity. This will help to enhance self concept in the culturally

diverse students, and encourage them to take pride in their own and other cultural heritages. It is important to explore both teaching and learning styles, as the teacher's behavior can be the key factor in helping students to reach their potential, regardless of ethnicity, exceptionality, gender, language, or religion. There are very few curricula designed specifically for exceptional students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The teachers usually adapt the curricula and instructional strategies to meet the needs of these children. Some children experience 'temporary learning disabilities' because of a discrepancy between what they bring to the school program and what the school program asks of them (Jonietz, 1990).

Special educators tend to submerge language-minority children in English, when it makes more sense to teach in a language the child understands better (Willig, 1986). Bilingual special education teacher training is not only a strategy for promoting cultural pluralism in our schools, but is also a way to promote equal education opportunity for LEP students with learning disabilities (Baca, 1984). The training of the bilingual special education teacher should occur within the framework of multicultural education. However, knowledge of English is just one of the challenges faced by students from diverse cultural backgrounds, and membership in a particular cultural group does not automatically invest the teacher with special abilities or techniques (Baca & Cervantes, 1991). To minimize incompatibilities between bilingual exceptional children and standard school

curricula, it is generally agreed that certain perspectives of the child's culture and heritage should be taken into account, although there is no consensus on exactly how they should be dealt with (Whitaker & Prieto, 1989). The differences existing among children should be recognized as a positive force in society and nurtured as such. The goal of multicultural education is to sensitize teachers to differences in individuals and to help them to appreciate cultural diversity (Slade & Conoley, 1989).

Conclusion

Multicultural education is education that embodies the values of cultural pluralism (AACTE Commission on Multicultural Education,1973). In the near future, teachers will encounter a variety of students in most classrooms, students who may appear to be from the same geographical area, but have individual cultural differences inspite of that. The differences will not be only in physical and intellectual abilities, but in the experiences and background influences that they bring with them. These in turn will effect the school culture as a whole. Teachers need to understand the cultural factors, as well as the intellectual and physical factors, that affect learning and behavior, to be able to teach effectively. Multicultural education is an educational concept that addresses cultural diversity and equality in schools.

Multicultural education for exceptional children is but one way to establish a stronger link between the various inhabitants of this earth to create a harmonious environment. Since we live in a global society, students need to learn how to become effective

citizens of the world community. This is unlikely to happen if they study any of the school subjects, like science, history, literature, current affairs, and music primarily from the perspectives of their own microculture or national culture. For multicultural education to become a reality in schools, the total environment must reflect a commitment to multicultural education (Banks, 1981). Even when there is no language barrier, misunderstandings between individuals from different cultural groups can occur. This happens when one cultural group is quite ignorant about the culture of another group. One can learn to function comfortably in more than one cultural group by overcoming one's ethnocentric view of the world (Banks, 1981). To enable regular and special education professionals to bring about effective learning among students with disabilities from diverse cultural backgrounds, they must free their perspectives and philosophy from - racism, sexism, prejudice, oppression, power, equality, stereotyping, and ethnocentricism.

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